

REMARKS OF RASHAD HUSSAIN, U.S. SPECIAL ENVOY TO THE
ORGANIZATION OF THE ISLAMIC CONFERENCE
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Thank you very much for convening this important forum. I am honored to be here with you. All of us have important roles to play in promoting peace and human development. And I'd like to discuss today the critical voice of religious leaders and religious communities in emphasizing that all faiths reject violent extremism. This is a message that President Obama has articulated numerous times since he took office. And as his Special Envoy to the OIC and as an American Muslim, I'll briefly address this topic today.

Last year in Cairo, the President stated that violent extremism has no place in Islam and is rejected by its holy texts. In doing so, he quoted a famous verse of the Quran, which equates the murder of any innocent person with the killing of the entire humanity. He did so after the massacre at Fort Hood in Texas, where he noted that no faith accepts such acts, and that the killer will face justice in this life and the next. After the attempted attack on the 25th of December, he reiterated this message, and noted that the vast majority of victims of terrorism are Muslims. And he did so again after the recent attempted attack in Times Square. Despite these attacks, the President has reaffirmed our commitment to engaging Muslim communities all over the world, and we will not let a group of extremists take us off course.

All of the evidence in Islamic law is on one side, and all qualified scholars of Islam are on the same side – the side of peace and justice. One of the things shared by all those who call people to violent extremism is that they lack the requisite training in Islamic sciences to qualify as alims or muftis to make religious rulings. These individuals continue to couch their calls to extremism in Islamic terms and to provide false religious justifications for their actions.

This rhetoric is something we must all reject. As Prime Minister Erdogan stated yesterday, the term “Islamic terrorism” must be rejected because Islam rejects terrorism. And as John Brennan, the President’s counter-terrorism adviser, explained this week, “Nor do we describe our enemy as jihadists or Islamists because jihad is holy struggle, a legitimate tenet of Islam meaning to purify oneself of one’s community. And there is nothing holy or legitimate or Islamic about murdering innocent men, women and children. Indeed, characterizing our adversaries this way would actually be counterproductive. It would play into the false perception that they are religious leaders defending a holy cause when in fact, they are nothing more than murderers, including the murder of thousands upon thousands of Muslims. This is why Muslim leaders around the world have spoken out forcefully and often at great risk to their own lives to reject al-Qaida and violent extremism. And frankly, their condemnations often do not get the

recognition they deserve, including from the media. Moreover, describing our enemy in religious terms would lend credence to the lie propagated by al-Qaida and its affiliates to justify terrorism, that the United States is somehow at war against Islam. The reality, of course, is that we have never been and will never be at war with Islam. After all, Islam, like so many faiths, is part of America.”

But despite all of this, terrorists continue to recruit followers in the name of Islam. How are they able to do so with the evidence stacked against them? One tactic used in addition to misquoting and taking verses out of context is exploiting the grievances that some individuals have against some governments and their policies. They will typically list a litany of complaints, try to build their credibility, and at the end say, “therefore you must take up arms,” in an attempt to attract others to their cult.

So what is the role of religious leaders in combating these calls to violence and promoting peace?

First, religious leaders should continue to make prominent statements and issue rulings rejecting terrorism. Islam can serve as the most powerful tool for combating extremism. Making clear that the Qur’an and the Sunnah reject terrorism can prevent individuals from turning to terror and in some cases has been shown to rehabilitate those who advocate violent extremism.

Second, religious leaders should make sure they are explicit in rejecting the use of terrorism regardless of any grievance against any government or policy. We must recognize that government policies cannot be blamed for this violence. It is important to note that the overwhelming majority of victims of terrorism are Muslims. How can anyone blame government policies for the decision to attack fellow Muslims on Friday prayer? How can anyone justify going on a plane and killing other innocent individuals – both non-Muslim and Muslim - without any doubt in his heart that this is a sinful act that will result in their spiritual, as well as their physical, destruction? It is our duty to reject this ideology unequivocally and blaming the foreign policy of any country is not the answer.

Third, religious leaders should use new media and forms of communication that can reach youth and populations that may not be engaged in mosques or community life. Terrorists have been effective in using tools such as YouTube videos and websites to communicate their messages. Religious leaders must do the same.

Fourth, religious leaders should continue to be involved in interfaith efforts and other activities to counter misperceptions of Islam. Islamophobia and false depictions of Islam as a violent religion undermine security by fueling the terrorists' narrative of a war against Islam.

Finally, in addition to making statements rejecting terrorism, religious leaders should go one step further by making it clear that there is a religious obligation to help protect the sanctity of life by leading and cooperating in efforts to stop terrorist plots. There have been a number of such success stories in the U.S. and around the world, and cooperation between religious communities and governments will continue to play a major role in protecting international security. Religious leaders have played a critical role in combating terrorism and as they take their efforts to the next level, our ability to eradicate this corrupt ideology will greatly improve.